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California 8th-graders face algebra mandate

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The California State Board of Education agreed Wednesday to do something that no state in the nation has attempted: put every eighth-grader in public school through Algebra 1.

The tough new requirement, which takes hold in three years, is expected to send shock waves across middle schools throughout the state. Currently, half of California's eighth-graders enroll in Algebra 1 – a high rate compared with other states. But the other half is struggling mightily with basic sixth- and seventh-grade mathematics.

The 8-1 board decision drew deeply polarized responses from educators, politicians and business leaders. Among the strongest voices was Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who urged the change in an unexpected letter to board members Tuesday.

"Today's decision sends a signal to the rest of the nation that California has faith in our students to achieve their dreams and exceed expectations," Schwarzenegger said in a statement issued Wednesday. "California's children have already proven that when we set the bar high – they can do anything."

Many others were outraged. They said it was unfair and unrealistic to expect every 13- and 14-year-old student to master the notoriously difficult subject without a massive infusion of cash to pay for books, computer programs, more class time and more qualified teachers.

The subject, which involves abstractions and solving for the unknown, is considered critical not just as a mathematical foundation, but for developing critical thinking. Although many students succeed in algebra before getting to high school, others are still struggling with fractions, decimals and exponents and need more time, educators said.

"We're setting every school up for failure," said state Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell, who argued passionately against the move. "It's going to be a firestorm in our state."

He noted that although California has high levels of enrollment, many students are not mastering the subject. Testing even more unprepared students will lead to more low test scores that will bring more penalties to schools under the federal No Child Left Behind regulations, O'Connell and others said.

O'Connell also raised concerns about the current budget crisis and said schools could not afford to implement the eighth-grade algebra requirement.

Schwarzenegger's secretary of education, David Long, acknowledged during the meeting that

it could cost billions to enable all eighth-graders to succeed in Algebra 1. When pressed about paying for it, Long expressed confidence that the state would solve its immediate budget impasse, but did not say how or when the state would cover the new algebra bills.

To many, Wednesday's decision was not only huge, it came out of the blue.

Until the day before, the state board was set to debate a new and easier Algebra 1 exam for certain eighth-graders. The new test was created to appease the U.S. Department of Education, which found California out of compliance in testing students. The department noted California's academic standards call for Algebra 1 in eighth grade, yet half of eighth-graders are tested at lower sixth- and seventh- grade levels.

The federal government told California to either enforce the standard for all students by enrolling and testing them in Algebra 1 within three years, or develop an alternate test with some – but not all – Algebra 1 concepts for students not completing the full subject.

The state chose to develop the new test, O'Connell said, to promote both rigor and flexibility.

The exam, which covered 15 of the state's 29 individual standards for Algebra 1, became controversial. Some critics called it "Algebra Light." Department leaders said it was the best compromise for meeting the federal guidelines, and put it on Wednesday's agenda for adoption.

Late Tuesday, however, Schwarzenegger transformed the debate with his letter. In it, he urged state board members to skip the alternative algebra test and instead take the leap of putting all eighth-graders through a full course of Algebra 1.

The governor argued that a two-tiered system was inequitable. His message resonated with many who have been concerned about the well-documented disparity in achievement among children who are poor, African American or Latino.

For the next 24 hours, people rallied on each side. They sent out press releases with exclamation points. They called in colleagues to testify. They packed the chambers to witness the long and historic board session.

After listening to several hours of testimony, board members offered their own impassioned views.

"I think we've got to set our standards higher, not lower," said board member Greg Jones. "A two-tiered system is going to be unequal."

Member David Lopez agreed: "We need bold innovative action to make things happen," he said.

Board member James Aschwanden, who cast the only dissenting vote, cautioned that the policy change was "hatched in the last 48 hours" and had serious implications for children and schools that were not being addressed.

"I'm embarrassed for us, quite frankly," Aschwanden said. "Not all children are developmentally ready to take algebra in eighth grade."

Several board members said they wanted to hold Schwarzenegger accountable for providing money for the new algebra requirement. In his letter, the governor said he was "committed"

to providing the needed resources.

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